

## **Nineteen Months from Now** by orphan\_account

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Coming Out, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, F/M, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Off-Screen Suicide Attempt, Period-Typical Homophobia, Slow Burn

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**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, background Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

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**Summary:**

After catching Billy Hargrove trying to off himself, Steve Harrington will be damned if another person dies in Hawkins and he just stands asides to let it happen. Then things change.

## 1. July 1986 (January 1985)

### Author's Note:

I've always wanted to write a slow burn and I guess this is the hill I'm building a house and living the rest of my days on it. Formal trigger warning for this chapter: Billy tries to kill himself, but it's not shown on screen. Unbetad, so all mistakes are my own and pointing them out is helpful!

Steve should have known something was wrong when Max came up to him after school asking for a ride.

The two hadn't talked much since That Night in October — it of course warranted capitalized letters, because Steve didn't know what to call it otherwise. A nightmare? A hellacious journey into another dimension? — after realizing their only commonality was Dustin and their shared time in that liminal space between Hawkins and the worst of the Upside Down.

And it's funny that a random January day in 1985 is what throws it all out of whack, what sets off nineteen months worth of changes and life altering revelations that shake Steve down to his core and maybe (he would say) make him a better person in the end.

It's what he's working to reconcile with his therapist, which is really just a survivors group for abuse that he sits in on every third Thursday of the month. Not like he can actually afford one-on-one counseling in the first place. It's just him and fourteen other women crammed in a room in a church in Old Town.

If he could change his story, leading up to now, he wouldn't.

He'd just orchestrate it differently. Fluff up the details (maybe make himself look a little cooler, but he's secure enough in himself to note that he's kind of a wuss when he wants to be but nuts up when he needs to and he supposes that's what counts.)

He'd tell it with less blood and heartbreak. Or maybe the blood and

the heartbreak was what made it — what made them.

Or maybe he' just romanticizing the whole thing. Time and distance will do that is what the group shrink says.

“Babe,” from the living room, a male voice. *Him*. “Show’s startin’.”

“Coming!”

Steve puts the pen back in a metal canister that housed coffee grounds last week and shuts the journal. He’s getting better, he thinks. He’ll never be OK after Hawkins and he’s come to terms with that, but he’s here now and he’s breathing (*he’s in love!*) and he’s going to sit down with his boyfriend — his *boyfriend* — to watch Saturday Night Live.

He throws himself onto the worn down couch and is awarded a kiss to the temple for his efforts. This is where is supposed to be.

“You OK, Stevie?”

Before this moment, there’s another Steve in another time and another place, when it started nineteen months ago. If the two of them could meet now in his living room in Chicago, he’s not sure they’d recognize each other.

But it’s July of ‘86. The world is changing.

“Yeah,” Steve smiles softly. “Never better.”

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It’s January, just after Christmas break and Steve is freezing his ass off even with the heater of the Beemer up on full blast and his hands in leather gifted gloves.

He’s waiting for Dustin in the Hawkins Middle School parking lot, which typically he would think of as weird but Mrs. Henderson had taken a shine to him after Everything Else. (Dustin had made

everything work when he lied by the skin of his teeth with praise of what a great babysitter he was. So maybe the second part wasn't a lie, Steve grouched, but the first part... well maybe Mrs. H didn't really need to know about it.)

Everything else...

How do you tell a hypochondriac single mother her son was not only responsible for the death of their pet cat but that their trusty neighborhood babysitter also nearly got him eaten alive by a pack demon dogs, masquerading as said son's not-actually-a-salamander pet salamander?

You don't. You just don't.

You smoke a cigarette and go to the theater and drown out whatever's banging around your head with whatever the latest, greatest thing Spielberg's churned out to grace the screen.

Maybe, if you're feeling festive, you even smoke two cigarettes. Steve's never claimed to be healthy with his coping mechanisms, he thinks, but at least he was alive and not in —

*—the pool, can't look at it not anymore, don't want to see what could be at the bottom of—*

*—the Byers living room Jesus Christ, a calamity of Christmas lights and ripped walls and how the fuck does anyone live like this except there's—*

*—fire, fire whooshing past his face and the smell of hairspray and blood in his throat holy shit he is going to die in this house in the middle of Nowheresville, USA with his girlfriend and her fuckbuddy and—*

*— a ceramic plate against his skull, a fist caving in his nose, and*

*—*

*— dirt, under his cheek, in his hair and if it wasn't for the stupid fucking rubber gloves, then in his fingernails too but Dustin, they're coming, get him safe keep him safe, the dogs are coming, DON'T JUST STAND THERE, SHITHEAD! We're going to di—*

The knock at his window has him jumping, knocking his head against

the roof of his car. He looks at the dash: 3:45 p.m. He looks out the window and there's Dustin, smiling with all his new teeth (he's so proud of that kid, sometimes), and a solemn looking Max trailing behind him.

Steve realizes he must have nodded off, waiting for them to finish with A.V. Club.

Dustin is carrying her books. Max looks like she'd rather be doing it herself, and Steve gets it, but there's something to be said for the satisfactory feeling of believing you're wooing a girl. Despite the fact his heart is racing in his chest, Steve can't help but crack a small smile at Dustin in return.

He rolls down the window: "So I see the little turd has roped you into something, huh?"

"Billy's a dickhead," Dustin pipes up as Max purses her lips, instead saying, "Billy asked if you'd take me and The Party to the arcade and drop me back off at 7:30 p.m."

He stares back at her like she's personally responsible for keying his car and slashing all four tires. Then, he wonders if his life is one cosmic joke, like the front cover of a *Weekly World News*, for the following reasons:

1. Billy Hargrove never asks. Period. He doesn't think he's ever even heard the shitstain say please before in a non-sarcastic, non-demeaning way. It's the same way how you'd never expect a duck to play the trumpet. No lips, not possible. Hargrove — no manners, a snowball's chance in hell of being respectable.
2. Billy Hargrove has gotten better about letting Max hang out with the rest of The Party — nearly taking a baseball bat to the nuts will do that to you — but never, *never* would Hargrove let Steve take Max anywhere by herself and frankly, Steve doesn't totally blame him. It's weird to be 18, going on 19-years-old, and be alone with a teenyboper who's not your sister, niceties be damned.
3. Even with the resulting almost-castration at the hands of his step-sister *nobody* drove Max anywhere except for Billy. When Steve had tried to ask Max about it, she shut it down with a

rather non-descript “his dad wouldn’t like it,” answer which both dissatisfied and chilled Steve.

Steve blinks back to reality when he realizes he’s just been staring the two teens down in the parking lot without so much as an answer or a preamble.

So without much couth he says, “He said what?”

Max sighs. “I knew you’d be weird about it,” she says. “He’s right over there with his car, see?”

When Steve follows the length of her puffy-coat covered arm, there is Billy Hargrove at the very end, X-marks the spot. He’s bundled in a grey zip up jacket with a hooded sweatshirt underneath that doesn’t seem to fit him very well. He’s too far away from Steve to see what he’s thinking, but even so, the Aviators pushed all the way up the bridge of his nose obscure most of his face outside of his mouth, which is adamantly sucking on a cigarette.

Steve raises a hand in a little half-hearted wave, that fake kind of jiggle he’s seen his mom do in the grocery stores when she runs into a chick his dad cheated on her with and she doesn’t want to make a scene.

He doesn’t know why he thinks of that in this moment.

Billy nods his head up once, quick and jerky and that seems to be that. He hesitates getting into the car, Steve notes. Or maybe that’s just his imagination. He has a lot more questions than answers regarding Billy Hargrove and they just keep growing by the day.

“What’s your brother planning anyhow?” Steve doesn’t take his eyes off Billy, not as he climbs into his Camaro and certainly not as he pulls away with none of his usual pomp and circumstance.

Is it possible to drive a car away in a reserved way?

“I don’t know,” Max says. “Are you gonna let us in the car or are we going to freeze, asshole?”

“Hey! You can’t call Steve an asshole!”

Max rolls her eyes at Dustin's offence, then looks back at Steve. "Well?"

He pops the locks on the car and the two shuffle in the back, blowing on their fingers and yeah, he feels a little bad but he feels even weirder about Billy.

Steve cranks the heat then turns around to look at the two in his back seat.

"And you two are just OK with this?" His eyes dart back and forth between Max and Dustin's face. "You're just cool with Hargrove giving her money and asking for absolutely nothing in return. No bones? No strings attached?"

Max shrugs. "I don't ask questions if he's off my back and not bothering The Party."

Steve looks Dustin who nods sagely and goes, "A quiet Billy Hargrove is a good Billy Hargrove, my man. Sometimes you just don't questions ab— "

Steve turns around and tunes them out.

There's something funny that sits in his mouth as he pulls away from the middle school and Steve can only name it a few days later when the dust has settled and he can look back on today with perfect clarity: Dread.

So he both does and doesn't do what Billy asks in the end.

Steve takes the kids to the arcade because he isn't heartless. If Hargrove wants to give away his money for a bunch of pintsized shitheads to go blow on Frogger and Galaga, then he's going to let the squirts do just that.

What he does do, is drop them off at Palace Arcade, consult his watch and then tell them firmly: "It's a little after four right now and I'm going to be back at 6:30, you got that you little shits?"

"You're not coming in?" Dustin looks only moderately heartbroken, but Steve can see a little past his shoulder and both Lucas and Will

are jumping furiously at an arcade game as big as a fridge. It's not like he's leaving them high and dry.

"And risk what little cred I have left on you?" Steve scoffs, "Not likely, Henderson. I'll see you at 6:30."

"But Billy said 7:30!" Max yells as she's walking backward from the car, glaring.

"And I'm saying 6:30!" Steve yells back.

As Steve speeds out of there, he can swear he hears Dustin holler, "You don't have to keep up this douchebag front Steve! I know you care!" but he'll file that away for another time.

Twerp.

It's only when cruising down the side streets of Hawkins does Steve realize he has no idea where he's going. Literally not a clue. Hawkins isn't that big, but there's a lot of long stretches of nothingness that separates houses sometimes — farmland, empty lots, factories. While Steve wouldn't put it past the Hargroves to live out in bumfuck, with the fact that all Billy does is complain about that there's nothing to do in Hawkins, he has a gut feeling they're in the suburbs closer to downtown.

Which still only leaves about 300 houses to peruse and only about two hours to do it in.

Great.

"Now if I were an egotistical metal head with rage problems, where would I live," Steve says aloud, turning up the radio. It's set to some hot pops station playing Club Tropicana, which Steve would turn if anyone else were in the car but honestly? Wham!'s a guilty pleasure of his.

He spends the better part of the first half an hour of Billy Hunt 1985 (as he's taken to calling it) petering around downtown just to see if he's at any of the shops. There are so many variables to account for, and while Steve's not too good at math, he knows the probability of literally driving right past Billy while going into the suburbs and the

other guy is driving into downtown is more than likely pretty high.

“This is stupid, Harrington,” Steve mumbles while stopped at a red light. His fingers tap along to the radio.

Green light.

Stop sign.

Kids at a crosswalk.

No Billy.

What is he doing again? Going on a misguided adventure? As if he hadn't had enough excitement back in October, here he is, freaking himself out for no goddamn reason.

He peels out of downtown into the suburbs, arbitrarily heading South on Euclid as he gives himself an ultimatum: If he doesn't find Billy Hargrove's stupid Camaro — because where there's smoke there's fire, and where there's that tin can then the meathead himself can't be far — by 6 p.m. on the fucking dot, then he's going back to the arcade.

That gives him a little less than an hour, about 56 minutes. Not that he's counting.

Steve starts with the suburb where Mike and Lucas live, because it seem right. Most of the kids live in that general direction anyways, and while his house is a little removed from that vicinity, he doesn't actually know why he didn't start there in the first place. Selfishly, a part of him was hoping Billy's car would just be at the Hideaway or, god forbid, the public library. He wanted to be wrong about this bad feeling. More to the point, he just wanted not to care.

Since getting his nose broken at the Byers', Steve and Billy had this weird song and dance going on of mutual respect verging on wanting to beat the shit out of each other still. There were no apologies offered, no words spoken to reference what had happened outside of bruises that lingered well into Christmas break, but something had fractionally changed between them. There was a new understanding.

Max had helped to broker that.

Steve knew Billy had some ground rules which he had heard from Dustin, who had heard from Lucas after Max had relayed it all to him. Sometimes, he hated that his social life and juicy gossip now came from middle schoolers but Demogorgons and demon dogs will do that to people.

Billy's ground rules were simple and twofold: stay away from The Party at all times until Max needs to go home and don't beat Steve's face in anymore. Steve particularly appreciates that last one, but his pride wilts slightly at the thought a 13-year-old girl has more chutzpah than he does. No more fat lips and bruised eyes though meant his parents stop answering questions and that was better than anything, Steve reasoned. They would lock him up for life if he breathed a word about the real reasons behind his previously, frequently fucked up face.

It wasn't perfect but overall, it was a truce, and Steve could live with that if the boys could. And Jesus, wasn't he just turning into Mr. Mom? Who would have thought.

He ends up turning down Maple.

Then down Dearborn.

He rounds off Elm and Cherry and even rumbles down Kerley, which makes his skin crawl a little. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

"This is stuuuupid," he sing-songs to himself. He feels like he did when he bought Nancy roses and tried to apologize for something they both knew was over, shriveled up and dead.

The ad ends on the radio. Queen starts playing, softer at first, until it crescendos into a squealing guitar and Steve has to turn it down just a hair.

He's in the middle of knocking the dial down two clicks, it's only seconds really, when his eyes spot it — Billy fucking Hargrove's car, backed into a the driveway of a bungalow almost inconspicuous. The only reason Steve knows, and lord knows how, is because of the

crack in the driver side headlight from when Max nearly killed them all with her driving and the very prominent California license plate tacked to the same side.

He checks the clock, 5:34 p.m, and groans.

It's before his self-professed deadline and in that moment he kind of hates himself, debating if staying in the street and idling like a creep is worse than knocking on Hargrove's door. And say Hargrove answers — what does he do then?

*Hey Hargrove, just thought I'd swing by because your sister said you gave her money for her and her friends to hang out at the arcade and that just seems wildly out of character for you so I was wondering what the fuck is up? You feelin' OK bud?*

Yeah, that would go over real smoothly and he'd probably get a punch to the head for his troubles. After nearly three months clean of that, he'd rather not.

Before he can rationalize anything else he finds himself pulling into the driveway, throwing it into park and killing the engine.

Holy shit, he's doing this.

He checks himself in the rearview mirror. Not a hair out of place.

OK, so he really is — hand on the lever to open the door, keys in his pocket — doing this. Maybe, he hopes, there just happens to be another house with another Camaro with another California license plate that *also* happens to live within driving distance of Hawkins High School and stone's throw from away the other kids in middle school.

Stupid, really, but stranger things have happened in Hawkins.

He openly wants to be wrong for the first time in his life.

Steve makes his way up to the door, snow crunching beneath his boots. Before he can second guess himself raps three times on it. The whole time this wind has been lightly blowing, burning the tips of his ears.

He waits a minute.

Then a minute longer.

What if his car is here but he's not home? It's possible Tommy H. or one of their other little toad posse — and it doesn't escape him, calling his old friends toads — came by to pick him up. It's a Friday, just after break, and with not much to be said for homework considering the new semester, it's completely possible they've run out of town to one of the bars that still served beer under the table to 18-year-olds.

Not that it mattered anyways. Billy was only seventeen.

Why he knew that, Steve had no idea.

He knocks again and for good measure, he even tries the knob. To his surprise, it opens. Steve peaks his head in and looks around. He doesn't know what he expected to be in the house, honestly. Torture chamber? Dead animals? Max lives here too, so it's not like the Hargrove household as a whole must be some Motley Crue murder pit.

With his head still peaked in the door, he knocks twice more while pulling the scarf from his nose and calls out, "Hello?"

He's not sure how kindly the Hargroves would take to him letting out all their cold air, let alone —

There's a bump thumping noise from inside the house that sounds suspiciously like a chair falling over.

Steve pushes himself indoors. The front door closes with a click.

The silence is deafening.

"Hargrove?" He calls out. "Hey listen man, I'm just here to..." he trails off.

To give you back your money? He can't he already bummed it off to Max and Dustin and besides, there's —

Steve straightens up, ramrod, at a choked off gurgle and the sound of falling *something* hitting the ground and before he's really aware he's thumping down the hall in the direction of the noise.

God, he really wishes he had his bat. If it's something from the Upside Down then he's fucked, they're all fucked, and he shouldn't be running at it. He should be getting Hopper, Eleven, Mike, *someone* who's infinitely more knowledgeable about all of this. He should be yelling at the top of his lungs right now.

Nancy would know what to do. Johnathan would even know what to do if there was —

Steve lurches to a stop so fast it almost knocks him on his ass.

"Woah," is all he can say.

There's Billy Hargrove lying spread eagle on the plush carpet floor, eyes glassy and chest heaving. Around his throat is double wrapped a bright orange extension cord. The other end of the cord is knotted around a chin-up bar, which apparently has been ripped from the doorframe if the markings in the wood is anything to go by.

And if anything is to go by, it looks like Billy Hargrove just tried to fucking hang himself.

"What the fuck is this?" Steve is still frozen, even more so when Hargrove says in a voice so hoarse it's barely audible, "What the fuck... are you doing... in my house?"

"Why the fuck — did you just try to —,"

"What the fuck are you doing in my house!" Billy screams, or as well as he can with a probably damaged windpipe. He tries to sit up but the cord drags the pole, and the pole weighs him back down, the stress too much for the new bruises.

"What the fuck are you doing trying to do!" Steve screams back, dropping to his knees. He moves to unknot the extension cord from Billy and is batted away from the other boy's throat for his troubles with a hard swat.

Billy reaches for the chin-up bar and wrenches himself into a sitting position. He snarls something animalistic, no real words, and looks poised to maybe even beat Steve with the very thing he just tried to kill himself with.

Wouldn't that just be ironic?

Steve holds up his hands, palms facing Billy, and steady's them level to his eyes. Nothing to hide, nothing to show.

After a beat, Billy demands: "Where's Max?"

Easy enough. "Not here."

"Where?"

"With the rest of the twerps. At the arcade."

This seems to satisfy Billy, who nods once.

Neither of the boys move, just look at each other. Billy is very obviously studying Steve, as Steve is lowering his hands into his lap and Steve, well. He's looking at Billy as if he's trying to ascertain if there's any real threat of him killing himself or Steve in the process and fuck — is Billy, starting to cry?

Steve opens his mouth. Closes it. Then opens it again only to say maybe the dumbest fucking thing since he called Nancy Wheeler a slut and got his ass beat by Byers senior for it: "Are you OK?"

Billy jerks back. Then he does something Steve doesn't know how to react to: he laughs. As a cliché, it reminds Steve of a hyena or some other cornered animal that doesn't know how to get its back off the wall so it does what it does best — improvise to survive.

"Hey I'm serious man—,"

"Shut... shut up." Billy says, shaking his head. He moves to rub a fist into his eyes and stops. His eyes dart to the pole in his hands. It seems like all at once, he's aware of the reality of the situation — aware of the incident Steve found him in. He's aware of the weakness he's shown in the face of his biggest, self-professed rivals. More to the

point, he's aware of how human it's made him look.

And Steve bets he hates it.

Billy starts to pick at the knot in the chin-up bar with a single-minded determination. His fingers, Steve notes, are trembling. He almost offers to do it for Billy, but he knows that would just make Hargrove fly into a rage and that was possibly the last thing he needed now.

If he needed anything, he needed to repair his pride first and foremost. Steve's not even sure that's going to be possible with him to do around. Maybe it's not possible to do ever, Steve thinks.

He wishes he was just a bit smarter or possessed a bit more tact to know what to say to Billy in this situation. Instead, Steve adjusts so he falls off his knee and shifts into a cross legged pose, watching Billy pick and pull until the knot comes loose little by little.

It's almost skincrawlingly uncomfortable to listen to Billy's nails click and tick as he goes to town on the tangled up length of cord.

When it's finally free, Billy pulls at the mess around his neck until that's off too. Steve isn't sure how long he was... *up there*, but it was long enough to give him a purpled ringlet of a bruise but short enough to apparently not cause any lasting damage. Well, any more damage than Steve already thought he had.

When the extension cord is in one hand and the chin-up bar is tossed over his shoulder into some parts unknown of Billy's room, finally he speaks to Steve saying: "You're not... going to tell anyone about this, capiche?"

He sounds like he wants to threaten but doesn't have enough force behind it to do so.

Steve doesn't say anything, just looks over Billy's hunched form. *I'm taller than him*, Steve realizes.

"Lemme rephrase," he tries again. "You're not going to tell anyone, or I'm going to beat your face in, got it?"

"No deal." Steve is even shocked by the sound of his own voice.

“What?”

“I said no deal.”

Billy’s free hand curls into a fist.

“What fucking game are you playing, Harrington?”

“No game.” Steve thinks he knows what he’s doing, the kind of truce that needs to be called with a brute like Billy Hargrove. If he sits back and lets Billy call the shots, then he’ll just be backsliding into the time Before The Bat, and that’s no good either. “A trade off.”

Billy looks him in the eye, finally. They’re red ringed and the right one has heavy bruising underneath.

“Shoot.”

“Apologize.”

Billy squints.

“Apologize to the kids by... Valentine’s Day and I won’t tell anyone about what happened here,” Steve says. “You have my word.”

“And that’s supposed to mean something to me?”

Steve shrugs. “I don’t feel like those are impossible terms.”

And really, they’re not. Steve feels like it would be more fair for Billy to answer the million and one questions buzzing around in his skull: what made you do this, why now, why here, who did that to your face, what would have happened if he didn’t find Billy in time, why would you ever think this is OK? But that’s overwhelming. And invasive. And a number of other things that Steve knows he’ll just have to bury and dig into another time, another place, and try to unpack it later.

“Do we have a deal?” Steve tentatively extends a hand. Billy grasps it. It’s actually weird how smooth his palm is for someone Steve assumes spends all day tinkering around with his car or lifting weights.

Billy just keeps on staring and Steve glances down at his watch.

“Shit,” he says, jumping to his feet. “It’s make or break, Hargrove. I’m already 15 minutes late to pick up the little boogers so tell me what it’s going to be.”

He knows they just shook hands but he wants to hear it said out loud and he tells Billy as much. Billy responds back with an “OK,” so lackluster that it almost leaves a bitter taste in Steve’s mouth. He takes what he can get, even if it is the verbal equivalent of a sour win.

“Not a soul,” Billy says. He stands in his bedroom doorway and watches Steve walk backwards to the front door. “Not a fucking word.”

Steve nods. “As long as you keep up your part of the bargain, that’s not a problem.”

He says this, when really he knows his mind isn’t going to let Steve rest until he knows for a fact Billy isn’t going to do something like this again. And why he cares? For someone who nearly sent him to the hospital? He doesn’t know. Maybe it’s residue guilt from Barb or something to do with the fact he sure as shit *knows* he can’t handle another indirect death he just stood by for on his conscience.

Billy gives one firm nod.

“Bring Max back now, too,” he rasps. “My dad will be home soon.”

Steve can’t argue with that. By the time he makes it to Palace Arcade and back, it’ll be pretty close to 7:30 and if he factors in dropping Dustin off, it’ll be just shy of 8 p.m. by the time Steve gets home himself. Not like that’s super late for him, but there’s something to be said for getting home before the sun goes down in Roane County nowadays.

“OK,” Steve says, and without any more of a preamble, leaves.

And as he clicks the door shut and makes his way back to the car, listening to the comforting sound of snow under his footfall, he doesn’t think about how this day is going to be the start of it all. He

doesn't think about how now is the starting block for one of the weirder but more human parts of his life. Yeah, he's faced down alien-demon looking shit from another dimension but Billy Hargrove was an alien-demon shit from *this* dimension who was mean and unpredictable and shared a history class with him — so really, which was worse?

He considers this as he makes his way back to the arcade.

There's nothing that could have prepared him for what he walked in on today, but then again, there's nothing that could have prepared him for Billy Hargrove.

And that, he didn't need a crystal ball to see. That he could tell right fucking now.

## 2. February 1985

### Notes for the Chapter:

small tw for implied/referenced suicide attempt and very light, casual period typical homophobia

Billy ends up apologizing the Monday before Valentine's Day.

Steve knows this because Dustin knows this because Lucas got his apology during the middle of Billy picking up Max, and if Steve had more time to analyze why his life sounds like a "Days of Our Lives" episode he would but he doesn't so he watches it all unfold.

Rather, he hears it all unfold as Dustin scream-recalls the story in Steve's front seat on the drive home after school. (Steve's afraid this might become a habit, picking up 13-year-olds from school and driving them home — what kind of senior does that? A senior with a sucker for too-proud-to-admit-they're-struggling single mothers and a slight soft spot for a kid who looked up for him, that's who. Apparently.)

But the way Dustin retells it, the story goes like this —

When Billy came to pick Max up from school, The Party was making plans to figure out when to schedule their next Dungeons and Dragons' night. They now had to add Max, which Mike wasn't thrilled about, and El, which Mike was over the moon about, to the party. (The twerps had allegedly lost the plot anyways following their second run in with the Upside Down.)

They were in the middle of arguing about the merits of doing a geology project all in one day or breaking it up into two and cutting D&D time in half when Hargrove had apparently skid into the Hawkins Middle parking lot radio blaring and horn wailing.

"Shitbird," he yelled, tapping his palm twice on the juncture of the car where the top of the door met the roof, "Time to go!"

Max had rolled her eyes so hard her whole head seemed to roll with

it to turn in his general direction to yell, “Wait one minute!”

Billy had grit his teeth but sat put while The Party had wrapped up their conversation, exchanged class notes and said their goodbyes. Dustin had watched as Max stalked over to the car and peeked her head into the open window for a minute. He had lingered, he tells Steve, to watch and make sure Billy didn’t try to pull a fast one on her.

Ah, young and unrequited love.

After a moment, he had thrown his leg over his bike and was about to ride home with Will when Max yelled: “Hey! Guys!”

And that’s how the four of them had crowded around Billy’s rolled down window and listened to a half assed apology a couple months too late and a kinda-sorta promise he would leave them alone. Max seemed appeased, Lucas seemed wary but accepting and Dustin truly didn’t give a shit.

At least, that’s what he said.

“Bullshit,” Steve says as he pulls into the Henderson’s driveway, pretending to be none the wiser to the reason why. “There’s no way it went down like that.”

“It did Steve! It did!”

“OK, and then what?” He throws the car in park.

“And then —,” Dustin waves his hands back and forth in front of his face as if that would explain everything, “And then what Steve? Billy Hargrove just apologized to us! He’s probably going to poison all of us in our sleep and dump our bodies in the quarry tonight, or, or use our sperm in Satanic rituals or something!”

Steve makes a face. “OK, for one thing, eww, but for another thing — why do you think he’s going to kill you guys? Like, why would an apology mean he’s going to kill you?”

“You don’t get it, he looked, like, *actually* sorry.”

“And?”

“And!? And that means he’s gonna do something that he probably doesn’t wanna do man, like something most normal human beings have a conscious for — like murder or cannibalism! How thick are you?”

“Get out of my car,” Steve says, popping the locks. Dustin stays planted. His lips are pressed together in a firm and disappointed frown.

“This is cold man,” he says.

“Henderson, I swear to god —,”

“We almost die together in the Upside Down, and you throw me to the Hargrove shaped wolves.”

“Hey, Max is a Har—,”

“*Wolves*, Steve.”

Steve groans loudly, thumping the back of his head against the headrest. “Oh my god, get out of my car!”

Dustin rolls out of the car in one fluid motion, scooping his backpack up from the footwell. He makes a move like he’s going to stomp up to his front door but instead turns around and knocks on the rolled up window. That little shit. Steve begrudgingly rolls it down and spits, “What?”

“Hargrove was wearing a turtleneck sweater when he did it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hargrove. Wearing a turtleneck sweater. Can you believe it? I didn’t even think that guy knew how to button a shirt up let alone buy one that covered his boobs.”

“He doesn’t have boobs,” Steve says before thinking. Then it hits him, the nature of the conversation they’re having. He flushes. “You’re fucking weird for calling them that, Henderson, so I’m gonna leave

and you're gonna go inside to do whatever the hell eighth grade boys do on a Monday afternoon that isn't masturbating."

Dustin wrinkles his nose. "Don't be crude."

"Don't knock it till you try it. Pretty sure reruns of 'Charlie's Angels' comes on at 4:30 and you can figure it all out then," Steve says back, throwing the car in reverse. "Later, dude."

"I know what the hell masturbating is!" Dustin yells, then claps his hands over his mouth, squeaks out a muffled, "God damn it!" and scurries into his house.

What a stupid kid. Cute, Steve thinks, but utterly hopeless until he learns how to lose that awkward fire and turn on his charm. He shakes his head and sets his sights on home.

Steve's up in his room, lying on his bed when the actual weight of Dustin's words about turtlenecks and forced apologies hit him. He turns to his side and curls inward, letting Morrissey's crooning lull him into a semi-dream state.

So Billy was wearing a turtleneck. Stupid thought, but maybe it meant the bruising was still there. Or maybe it meant there were new bruises. Maybe he had tried against since February. Or, Steve thinks, it just means Hargrove owns and wanted to wear a turtle neck sweater to school today because everybody in Hawkins owns wintertime sweaters and everybody in Hawkins includes Billy Hargrove.

(Steve highly doubts the first part of that.)

He had kept an eye on Billy throughout January the way people keep an eye on an impending head cold, only paying attention if it ached too much or interfered with daily life. He's not sure if he should have been more attentive. He's not sure if he should have gone to Hopper or Billy's mom and dad. Really, at 18-years-old, he's out of his depth here.

As he lies there, Steve contemplates several things all at once as they float through his brain, with the first being that the strange ass day back in January had actually happened. He had really come barreling into the Hargrove household, found Billy Hargrove with an extension cord wrapped around his neck and didn't make a fucking peep about it. It's not that he hadn't thought about it since then, just more that Steve hadn't put *much* thought into it since and may have tried to explain it away as a jerk off session gone awry.

Billy strikes him as a weird dude.

He then thinks that Jonathan would like this new album, but he doesn't actually think the guy has a CD player since they are pretty new, and kinda expensive, so that would mean inviting the guy over to listen to music which, eh. Maybe he could con his dad into buying him another player that he could sneakily give to Jon for his birthday or something which he's pretty sure was a couple of days ago but better late than never.

His dad wouldn't even ask, just nab one the next time he was out of town if Steve told him it was a newer model and he'd done good on his last Econ exam. But is it weird to buy things for your ex-girlfriend's current boyfriend? Steve's pretty sure they're friends, even with the whole break up bullshit, to use Nancy's word.

He files that away for another time.

Then Steve's thoughts float back to Billy, with one question burning bright: why would Billy Hargrove, teen dream of Hawkins High, try to kill himself? What was so horrible in his life that dying would be better than sticking it through?

Steve almost gets mad thinking about it. What was really so bad about that mulleted fucker's life? He had come into Steve's life and

done nothing but berate him on his clothes, Nancy, his woefully lacking sex life, his ability to play basketball — what did Billy Hargrove know about almost dying? Billy Hargrove knew about big city California living and Billy Hargrove knew what he thought he knew about life in small town Americana.

Though it pains him to admit it, he was what Steve was on track to become prior to his, Jon and Nancy's bonding moment at the Byers house: a fucking prick who thought the world revolved around him constantly because the his tiny high school atmosphere was revolving around him in this moment.

Billy Hargrove doesn't know shit, Steve decides, like what it's like to stare down a mouth of razor sharp teeth or hear the air sing as a baseball bat wizzes through the air and crushes the skull of a demodog. He doesn't know what it's like to feel that sharp, dropping sensation of anxiety in the process of creeping around the belly of a bestial underworld — doesn't know what it's like to be bait, to have a gun pointed at him, to choke on the cloying stench of burning alien flesh only to inhale fire extinguisher vapors and choke some more.

Billy Hargrove doesn't even know what the hell a demodog is, and that in itself pisses Steve off.

His life is pretty fucking good, all things considered, and Steve would trade all of his parents' wealth — his father's, really — for just a slice of that normalcy back that Billy is so ripe and ready to throw away. Sometimes, in the dead of night fresh off the back of a nightmare with sleep still clinging to his eyelashes, Steve wishes he was cowardly enough to get back in his car and drive away back in October '83. He wishes as soon as Nancy pulled that fucking gun on him, he would have ran good and far away, floored his car straight out of Hawkins and never come back.

He would have never seen a Demogorgon or stepped foot in Hawkins Lab. He could have still been something instead of Steve Harrington, the Babysitter — not that he didn't appreciate the runs when it came down to it, but realizing he was next-to-friendless and graduating high school in four months didn't really do much for the charisma or mental health.

When he has these thought though, it's typically followed by the quick prick of tears misting over his eyes and the tingling sensation behind his nose which meant he was either going to cry or man the fuck up and get over it.

More often than not, he chose option two.

But Billy didn't have these problems, doesn't have these problems. He'd heard from Max that their dad — her step-father, which she is always quick to correct — was kind of an asshole, but what fucking dad wasn't? The few times a month his own dad is home, Steve and he orbit each other like two strangers that only speak one common language: guilty gift giving. Steve would offer up a mediocre report card in exchange for extra gas money or new VHS's and cassettes. Nothing to write home about in terms of loving family, but nothing to boo-hoo over either, he thinks.

As the last notes of "Meat is Murder" play out, Steve shutters. The harsh violins and synths make him feel somewhat anxious. Maybe he won't recommend this to Jonathan after all, or at least this particular track. He moves to sit up and eject the CD, switching it out for something he was more familiar with that would calm him.

"Too fucking crazy," Steve says to himself.

God he was a mess. But the thing was, he would be damned if that meant sitting by while Billy fucking Hargrove moped and pouted about what a shitty life he apparently had when he didn't know shit.

If something was going on, then Steve was going to find out because that rat did not deserve the title of having the most fucked up life in all of Indiana. If Steve were more selfish, he would say that award would go to him. But as Bruce Springsteen twang about being from Smalltown, USA fills the room, he knew had to admit it.

That title of most fucked up kid in the county definitely went to Will Byers.

Valentine's Day, Valentine's week really, is a complete wash except for the fact that Steve starts operation What the Fuck is Wrong with Billy Hargrove the Friday after the sappy holiday.

He's standing in front of his open locker, spacing out on what books to grab when he comes up with the three, simple steps of the whole plot. He even wrote them out in the very back of his science notebook for safe keeping:

- Find out why Billy tried to kill himself
- Stop Billy from doing it again
- Beat the shit out of him if he tries to stop Steve

The last one is more of a personal protection act, but he wouldn't put it past Billy to wail on him should Steve deem it necessary to poke into his personal life. And okay maybe simple might not be the best descriptor, since nothing is truly simple with Billy Hargrove.

The only real wrench in his plan is that basketball season is looming perilously close to being over with the way the team is playing and the only other time he sees Billy is in French class. Apparently his junior status was overlooked when sticking him in with the senior class due to courses he had taken back in California.

The metalhead moron, a whiz kid in French — who knew?

But Billy skipped basketball in the few days following the January incident and the following Wednesday or Thursday when he returned, Steve honestly doesn't remember what he was wearing or if he had bruises. On a good day, Steve can hardly remember what he had for dinner the night before.

But what he did remember was that Billy skipped class that following Monday and Tuesday, claiming the flu. All the teachers all apparently ate it up, the coach just made him run laps for skipping and a number of girls in his different periods had tittered about how Billy was

finally back and that they were glad he was OK.

The point is, Steve's window to keep an eye on Billy gets smaller and smaller each day and eventually it's only going to be a 45 minute period every five out of seven days. Plus, it's not like they tolerate each other outside of class, so making up a reason for them to 'hang out' is bum too. Basketball season was ending soon too, if their current play was anything to go by which mean no playoffs which meant no additional court time.

Truly, Steve doesn't know why he cares this much. It's eating at the little brain cells still functioning in his skull after the same fuckhead he's trying to psychoanalyze beat most of them to a pulp months ago. It's because he's a good human being, he tells himself, not a self-centered shithead anymore.

Or, only a mildly self-centered shithead now.

He's not perfect. He'll admit that.

Steve comes back to himself and snatches "Catcher in the Rye" and a compilation of short stories by Isaac Asimov off the top shelf and stuffs them in his backpack. He'll just have to bide his time until fifth period. Joy.

Steve spends most of the day as a space case, the worst of the "senioritis," as Nancy had called it setting in since the longest break of the year was behind him and the end was in sight — only a pinprick in the distance at this point, but growing closer every day.

He spends the rest of his day with a glazed over look in his eye, counting down the seconds in the minutes of the hour it takes to go through each class. If held at gunpoint, he couldn't recite a single thing said to him all day and when lunch finally hits it's like a splash

of cold water to the face.

Steve is lucky because he has the same lunch period as Nancy, like last year, and somehow Jon has his study hall at the same time so he usually leaves wherever he roosts during the school day to join them. He doesn't know when they became a little trio but he honestly kind of likes it until they start making doe eyes at one another and he physically has to force himself to leave.

He still likes Nancy and all, but he's not a dick enough to throw away two years of friendship over a spurned romance.

"Do either one of you have Hargrove in any classes this semester?" Steve pops the question while taking the saran off a rather questionable looking turkey, mayo and cheese sandwich.

Nancy pokes at the cafeteria ravioli and watches the fork nearly bend in half.

"He bothering you again?"

"No."

Jonathan takes a sip of chocolate milk, "He bothering any of the kids?"

"No! Jesus I was just," he shrugs, "asking a question, you know."

They share a knowing look but don't say anything. Though they're his friends — best friends now, considering all they went through — sometimes they really annoy Steve with the amount of Vulcan mind melding they're able to do and all they're able to convey without saying a word. Maybe they really were great for one another.

And maybe those damn kids were rubbing more off on him than he thought.

Steve almost lets the topic drop and moves to start another train of thought when Jonathan says, "He's in my chemistry class, sits like, two rows behind me."

"I don't have him in anything," Nancy chimes in.

“Oh.” Now that he has this information, Steve doesn’t actually know what he wants to do with it. Lead into a question like *So, Johnny, have you stared good and hard at Hargrove’s neck recently or has he seemed weird to you?*

Rather not.

Then Nancy says, “Why do you ask?” but she won’t meet his gaze and is smushing her last noodle into a soupy mess of processed meat and tomato paste. She looks up at him through her long lashes. Classic Nancy demure diversion, Steve recognizes, and while he would have spilled his guts to her in the past it doesn’t really work now.

It’s weird enough still getting a boner over another man’s girlfriend — especially when she’s your ex, he’s your friend and they both have the ability to beat the shit out of you. He didn’t need to add that problem to a public setting.

Steve doesn’t know how to divert the conversation so he shrugs and instead tells them that Dustin told him that Billy Hargrove apologized to the whole lot of them and now Dustin thinks he’s going to be murdered as a result.

“That kid’s too cute,” Nancy laughs. “Billy?”

“No it’s true,” Jonathan says, ripping apart the empty milk carton idly. “Will told me the same thing and I thought he was joking too. Mike didn’t tell you, Nance?”

“Guess not.”

“So he did apologize then?” Steve never thought Dustin was lying, but it’s nice to have another source confirm what he knew anyways.

“That’s what Will says.”

“And you trust him?”

Jonathan gives him a look that calls him stupid in more nuanced ways than words could say. Steve looks away, purses his lips.

“So is that why you were asking about Billy?”

“Huh?”

“Billy,” Nancy repeats. “You think he’s going to do something to the kids?”

Steve hums and shakes his head. He debates telling them the real reason but instead opts to tell a sanitized version of the whole thing, watering it down to, “I told him to apologize to the runts last month at practice and I just didn’t think he’d actually do it, that’s all.”

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so shocked, Byers.”

“Not at you,” he says, pushing away the tattered scraps of once was the chocolate milk container, “at Hargrove. Didn’t think he’d take suggestions from anyone, let alone apologize.”

“Even a blind squirrel finds a nut, eh?” Steve elects to use this as an out, gathering all the trash from his lunch and getting up to throw it all away. By the time he gets back to the table, Jonathan and Nancy are already deep in conversation regarding something that happened with Tiffany Chu in their shared Advanced Literature class and Steve couldn’t care less.

He zones out through the rest of lunch too.

Steve decides he’ll talk to Billy after practice and thank him for following through on his end of the deal. He decides this halfway through math class around the same time he tries to talk himself out of Operation What the Fuck is Wrong with Billy Hargrove because, well, the title itself is a loaded question and Jon and Nancy had made

him inadvertently feel weird about the whole thing at lunch anyways.

It'd be weird if he confronted him about it overtly, so he'll just do it... more discrete? Straight forward? He'll be some mixture of concerned but upfront and he might as well just ignore the whole thing, he thinks as he graphs out a parabola on grid paper, because it's been almost a month and Billy Hargrove is still a fucking asshole.

If he was gonna kill himself and mean it, he probably would have done it already which means Steve has no business ripping off old scabs and pouring salt in the wound. Yeah, he thinks, it's easier to keep his head down and maybe just ask once if he's OK now.

It could be simple — after practice they'll hit the shower, Steve will finish dressing before Billy does and then he'll just wait for him to come out to his car. They'll talk, he'll tell Billy he'll keep his end of the bargain, because Billy kept his, and that will be that. He can use that time to make sure Billy is OK and then that'll be the end of it.

If Billy doesn't want to talk about it then OK and if Steve thinks it's really bad enough then he'll go and get Hopper. Simple.

Easy.

Done.

That's it.

Just checking in.

Except, and he should know at this point in his life things are easier said than done, even the best laid plans go completely to shit. And shit happens in the form of a group project during fifth hour French. And it's funny — despite being friends with a telekinetic preteen and taking on government agencies and going to another dimension, there's still one thing that never fails to make his blood run hot and his stomach feel like Steve's going to shit himself.

Group projects.

"You won't be picking your partners," Madame Bernard says, waving her hands like she's pushing the room together with her will,

“Everyone is going to be pairing up in groups of two — *alphabetically*, s'il vous plaît! That's it, move together and get cozy with your neighbor.”

Steve looks at Billy, who's already looking at Steve with a dead look in his eye and breaks the ice with a, “You're doing all of the arts and crafts shit part of this, you know that right?”

Maybe this is Steve's penitence for being ballsy the other night, he thinks. Maybe this is God's way of telling him to get fucked because he thought his life was so much worse than Billy Hargrove's and he wanted to stick his big ass nose into things that didn't concern him.

Well now he was here, nose deep in another man's business, having to suffer through French cases on top of everything else. And maybe the plan was back on again after all.

“I don't even know what we're supposed to be doing,” Steve mumbles as he butts his desk into Billy's.

“Yeah well, pay the fuck attention,” Billy mumbles back. He fishes a pen out of his jacket pocket and flips his notebook open to a blank page.

“Christ what crawled up your ass and died?”

“This class, for one.”

Steve can't help to huff out a laugh at that.

“Yuck it up, Harrington but I'm fucking serious about that arts and crafts shit.”

“What are you even talking about?”

Billy begrudgingly pushes a piece of paper Steve's way, who scans it and groans.

“A fucking diary?”

“I'm glad you're literate after all.”

Apparently the two of them are supposed to be making a diary of their days from now until mid-April, all in French and present it as if they're French tourists living in America. It has to have at least 45 entries and 10 pictures, half of which had to involve the partner somehow, with a cover page to tie it all together.

"What the fuck," Steve says, and he meant to keep it in his head, he really did, but this was just too stupid, "Are we in kindergarten?"

"Apparently."

They stare at the piece of paper for a moment, neither one of them moving to suggest anything further. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve can see Billy's wearing a sweater with a not very high collar, neck exposed.

Nothing's out of the ordinary.

Well, it has been almost a month, he supposes.

"So...", Steve looks around at the other groups who are already planning what they're going to write about for their fake tourist project. His and Billy's page is still glaringly blank and class ends in 15 minutes.

"So what?"

"What are we going to do, dipship? How do you want to plan this out?"

Billy huffs and scrawls four words in sloppy handwriting on the page: PLACES FOR FRENCH PROJECT. He underlines it twice, almost crossing out the word project as he does.

"You write like you have fucking Alzheimer's," Steve says without thinking.

"Keep talking and I'll pound you until you have fucking Alzheimer's, dick head," Billy shoots back.

"Pretty gay thing to say, *amigo*." God, why can he not stop talking? And if Billy's flared nostrils are anything to go by, he definitely heard

Steve. Hargrove breaths deeply and flexes his fingers.

“Can we just get this over with?” He says, in lieu of hitting Steve which Steve feels Billy no doubt desperately wants to do. It’s surprisingly mature.

“Fine.”

“So where are we s’post to write about for this stupid thing?”

Steve picks up the rubric.

“The students must have photographs or draw themselves visiting one place to eat, one place to have fun, one place to shop, somebody’s house, someplace in nature and someplace unique to Hawkins,” he reads verbatim. “The other four photos can be done in any other places the tourists want, but no more than three photos or drawings in one place, please. Please make sure you write your journals... blah, blah, blah.

Guess that’s probably the more important part.”

Billy snatches the paper out of his hands. “The fuck is ‘unique to Hawkins’ mean?”

“Language, *m’sieur* Hargrove.”

“Sorry, Madame,” he says in a cloyingly sweet voice that’s not Billy at all, “won’t happen again.”

“It means like, a Hawkins landmark I guess.” With each passing minute, Steve feels more resigned to this project and more curious about what he originally wanted to ask Billy in the first place — about his neck and his black eye and the day back in January.

The bell rings and before Steve can stand, Billy snatches him by the wrist.

“Gimmie your phone number and address.”

“What?”

“To get ahold of you for this, stupid. We’ll have to make weekend plans for this at some point.”

“Oh,” Steve says, pulling a pen out from behind his ear. He scribbles down both things and looks at Billy expecting him to do the same.

When he shuts the notebook and throws it back into his bag, Steve huffs.

“So... aren’t you going to give me your address and stuff or...,”

Billy shoulders his bag. “My house don’t have a phone.”

“That’s a fucking lie,” Steve says, following in suit.

“Yeah, Harrington?” Billy moves for the door, letting the other students mill out around them. “How would you know?”

“Because I’ve been in your house before, dipshit.”

It’s like watching a switch being turned on in that little space between Billy’s eyes. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t do anything outside of continuing to walk to his locker in the juniors’ hallway. But there’s something fundamentally different about his gait and the strength in his step that Steve notes and doesn’t say anything about.

Steve waits to see if Billy will do anything, acknowledge they both know exactly the time and the happenings of what he’s referencing, but it’s the loudest silence in a hallway full of people Steve’s ever experienced.

Then Billy says, “There a reason you still following me?”

And Steve doesn’t really have a reason so instead he just shakes his head and says, “no man, just spaced out,” and just like back in January, he walks away.

He doesn’t know what he’s doing, but he can’t help but feel like he’s entered into some kind of game with Hargrove, but not one either one of them want to play. See, Steve knows, even though he’s tried to talk himself out of it all day this morning after taking himself into it all of last night, that he’s still so fucking curious about Billy and

about his motives and about everything else that lead to this point.

And he knows Billy is a fucking steel trap, rusted over from years in the salt water and almost impossible to pry open. Good thing he has the next month, a high school level French vocabulary and an impeccable knowledge of Hawkins, Indiana to help him figure out how to do just that.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

fic blog: [poedamer0n.tumblr.com](https://poedamer0n.tumblr.com)